

“Jewish Travel Through Samaria in the Time of Jesus?”

Introduction

For hundreds of years, the church has heard from pastors, teachers, professors, and authors that Jews in the first century avoided travel through Samaria due to the hatred that existed between them and the Samaritans. Robert Gundry provides an excellent example of this position when he says,

One [main road] led...from Jerusalem past Bethany to Jericho, then north up the Jordan Valley and the west side of the Sea of Galilee toward Capernaum. To avoid Samaria, whose inhabitants the Jews despised, Jews often traveled this road in going between Galilee and Judea (*A Survey of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012, p. 47).

In fact, a quick survey of Bible commentaries, Bible dictionaries, introductions to the NT, and Bible-based websites will quickly reveal that the overwhelming majority of published works contain similar statements. Such a strong consensus of authorities would suggest that this is a slam-dunk, but evidence from the NT itself suggests otherwise.

Evidence from the New Testament

It appears that historically, the “jumping-off” point for this teaching is John 4:1-42. The text reads simply,

³He left Judea, and departed again into Galilee. ⁴ And He had to pass through Samaria. ⁵ So He came to a city of Samaria, called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph; ⁶ and Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour. ⁷ There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink" (John 4:3-7 NASB).

Historically, most interpreters have understood this passage as an example of Jesus' foreknowledge: i.e., He knew the Samaritan woman would be at Jacob's Well at a certain time, and planned His itinerary to correspond to her presence at the well. According to this interpretation, this explains Jesus' presence in Samaria, which is a total anomaly in terms of Jewish behavior.

Although this interpretation is embraced by a majority of commentators and pastors, however, it is not without its problems. First, in its original context in the Gospel of John, the divinely inspired author gives every evidence of focusing on the historical situation and the resultant geographical realities associated with it. Second, here at the beginning of chapter 4, he does *not* emphasize the divine foreknowledge/insight of Jesus as he does elsewhere in this gospel (John 2:24, 25; 5:6; 6:6, 64; 13:1, 3, 11; 16:19; 19:28), and as do the other gospels as well (Matt. 9:4; 12:25; 27:18(?); Mark 12:15; Luke 6:8; 9:47; 11:17, etc.). In verse 1, John notes that Jesus “knew” that the Pharisees had heard that His

popularity had exceeded that of John the Baptist's, but he does not repeat that verb in reference to Jesus' motivation to make an appearance at Jacob's Well. Third, the text explicitly states that Jesus' primary intent was to "*pass through Samaria*" (v. 4), the presence of Jacob's Well only happening to "be there" (v. 6). For all these textual reasons, it should be concluded that Jesus' journey through Samaria was not required by an exercise of His foreknowledge or divine insight, but was a common-sense decision dictated by geographical realities. The reality on the ground was that cutting through Samaria going to and from Jerusalem could cut off almost a week of travel—on foot.

Further, it should be observed that this was not the only time that Jesus intentionally travelled through Samaria. We hear of Jesus and His disciples passing through the land of the Samaritans in Luke 9:52-56 and 17:11-19, and in these instances as well, the concern appears to be a reasonable itinerary rather than divine foreknowledge/insight. Jesus' standard operating procedure was also followed by His earliest disciples. Philip the deacon is found traveling to and from Samaria (Acts 8:5, 26), as are also Peter and John (Acts 8:14-15, 25), and Paul and Barnabas (15:3). From all these passages, at least two points should be clear: 1) Jesus and His disciples were all Jewish; 2) nevertheless, they regularly travelled through and to Samaria; and 3) none of them demonstrate the least concern about Jewish-Samaritan hatred, violence, or issues related to ritual purity.

Evidence from Rabbinic Literature

While this evidence from the NT should be enough to cause those who accept and promote the consensus opinion to reevaluate their position, it is by far not the only evidence available that mitigates against it. While information in Rabbinic Literature corroborates the first-century reality of Jewish-Samaritan hatred, passages within that corpus also inform us that like Jesus and His immediate disciples, the rabbis also traveled through Samaria. "Rabbi Shemon ben Eleazar went to a certain town inhabited by Samaritans" (Jerusalem Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 5:4). Elsewhere we read, "Rabbi Ishmael ben Yose went to the town of Neapolis [modern Nablus, in northern Samaria]" (Jerusalem Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 5:4). More generally, the Tosefta tells us that Jewish herdsmen were allowed to leave cattle in the care of Samaritans when they were being driven through that region (*Avodah Zarah* 3:1). In light of Pharisaic scruples concerning ritual purity, such behavior would seem out of place, but Rabbinic Literature is clear, "Samaritan territory is [ritually] clean and its *mikvaot* [ritual immersion/baptismal pools], dwellings, and **paths** are assumed to be [ritually] clean" (Tosefta *Mikvaot* 6:1; Jerusalem Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 5:4). In fact, "Cooked food prepared by Samaritans are permitted" (Jerusalem Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 5:4)!

While the evidence of the NT, when combined with evidence from Rabbinic Literature should be sufficient to conclude the discussion, many scholars today would complain that evidence from RL should not be used to clarify passages from the NT because it is difficult to date. Such scholars would dismiss this evidence from RL and would generally tend to adhere to the traditional position that Jews avoided Samaria. For this reason, we now turn to a final corpus of literature.

Evidence from Josephus

The first-century historian Josephus was a contemporary of the apostles and wrote his four surviving works about the same time the NT was being written. In addition, Josephus was born and grew up in the land of Israel and therefore possessed first-hand familiarity with its geographical, religious, cultural, and social dynamics. He informs us, “For rapid travel, it was essential to take that route by which Jerusalem may be reached in three days from Galilee” (*The Life of Josephus* 269). Elsewhere and even more explicitly, Josephus explains, “It was the custom of the Galileans, when they came to the holy city [of Jerusalem] at the time of the festivals, to **take their journeys through the country of the Samaritans**” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 20:118). In a manner reminiscent of the NT and of Rabbinic Literature, Josephus even provides a specific instance of Jewish travel through the heart of Samaria, “At a village called Gema [modern Jenin, cf. *Antiquities* 20:118 and *History of the Jewish War* 3:48], situated in the great plain of Samaria, a Galilean, one of a large company of Jews on their way up to the festival, was murdered” (*War* 2:232). In a parallel passage, Josephus later refers to this event again, there explaining that the murder involved several pilgrims (*Antiquities* 20:118). When combined, these two accounts provided by Josephus enable us to date this event to AD 62, which places it well beyond the time of the ministry of Jesus and most of the ministry of His immediate disciples as well.

Conclusion

To conclude, the combined testimony of the NT, Rabbinic Literature, and Josephus makes it abundantly clear that Jewish travel through Samaria was permitted and frequent. From the words of Josephus in *Antiquities* 20:118, we can even conclude that it was standard operating procedure (“It was the custom...”). In comparison, there is *no* evidence to support the consensus position that Jews intentionally avoided Samaria due to racial/religious hatred and/or concerns over ritual purity. While it would make sense that this would be the case, the literary evidence in fact leads us to the exact opposite conclusion. Shared, perpetuated, handed-down ignorance is still ignorance in the last analysis, and God’s people deserve better. This issue is an example of careful study bringing clarity to a series of biblical events that traditional “wisdom” and “logic” had succeeded in only further obscuring. Further, when the evidence is seen as a whole, the extra-biblical material actually testifies to the historical accuracy of the accounts in Luke, John, and Acts, all of which cut against the grain of modern interpretative tradition, but which accurately reflect the realities of first-century Israel.

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